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Professionalization and Gender in Local Emergency Management

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There is no doubt that women are in short supply as emergency managers at the local level. In many parts in our society women still do not hold positions of leadership, authority or management. Emergency response agencies are no exception. Indeed, contemporary county offices of emergency management evolved from the traditional local offices of civil defense which were predominately occupied and operated by men. Thus, there is a long history of emergency management being considered a male domain. Although the number of women involved in the process of local emergency management is increasing, there has been little research on women's and men's different experiences in this environment. This exploratory study examines women in local emergency management by looking at how gendered expectations, roles, and relationships might affect local offices of emergency management.

A number of U.S. disaster researchers have conducted important studies of the field of emergency management focusing on such issues as legitimacy of local Offices of Emergency Management (OEMs) and models of directors' management styles (Dynes and Quarantelli 1975); a comparative study over a ten year period of changes in local emergency management agency operations (Quarantelli 1985); varying types of local emergency management agencies (Wenger et al. 1987); and a comparison of strategies and structures of successful and less-successful local emergency managers (Drabek 1987). Each of these studies makes a significant contribution to the social science investigation of emergency management by characterizing the field's structure and function, shedding light on the evolution of the field and its consequent effect on disaster mitigation and recovery.

None of these studies address the issue of gender difference among emergency managers probably because so few females held such positions at the

time of these studies. In Drabek's (1987) study only one OEM director was female leading him to conclude:

> . . . [T]here were no gender differences among the comparison groups. While the number of females holding emergency management positions has increased greatly during the past decade, the total number selected for this study was too small to analyze separately. . . . As the proportion of local emergency management agency directors who are female increases over the next decade, it will be important to assess potential variations in the types of managerial strategies that are used.

However, there has been a recent increase of interest in gendered social science analysis of disasters. Disaster researchers have begun to pay more attention to the heretofore absent perspective of women in the social experience of disaster. Neal and Phillips (1990) examined female-dominated local citizen groups which emerged in response to a disaster threat. Phillips (1990) explored the affect of gender differences in emergency response. Lastly, Enarson and Morrow (1998a) have compiled a comprehensive volume of gender in disasters which incorporates the missing element of gender into the disaster research discourse. Chapters discuss women's specific vulnerabilities to disasters as well as women's experiences in disaster planning and as disaster survivors, responders, volunteers, and emergency managers. These significant works have increased the base of knowledge of the relationship between gender and disaster.

This paper uses examples from several open-ended interviews with women emergency managers to illustrate how little is known about the relevance of gender in local emergency management and to ascertain some of the significant issues facing women in this field. All informants are current or former emergency managers in Florida (U.S.) county offices of emergency management. The majority of my respondents are rather young (mid-20s to mid-30s) and have been in the field from one to five years. Although race and class differences can be as important as gender differences in forming our "social locations" (Lorber 1998), none of my respondents are women of color. Therefore, I am only able to address the circumstances of white women emergency managers here.

Women in Gendered Organizations

As a preface to examining the specific case of women in emergency management, it is useful to review the organizational "gendering" process in general. "Gendered" organizational structures and practices have been well described in social science research (e.g., Ferree and Martin 1995; Acker 1991; Witz and Savage 1992; Rantalaiho and Heiskanen 1997). According to

Rantalaiho and Heiskanen (1997), gender is organized simultaneously in social structures, cultural meanings, and personal identities. The basic rules of the present male-dominated "gender system" are based on "difference" and "hierarchy" where women should be clearly distinct from men in both ideas and practices. One way to achieve this is structural by creating a public sphere for men and a private sphere for women, or segregating women and men to each their "own" jobs and tasks in working life (Lorber 1994). In this process both genders develop their own special skills which then seem to be part of their "nature." Furthermore, men take precedence or rate higher than women especially with reference to power and prestige (Rantalaiho and Heiskanen 1997).

Acker (1991) studied the "gendering processes" that reproduce gendered social structures in both public and private organizations. These processes include the creation of symbols and forms of consciousness, social interactions enacting gendered relations, and the internal mental work of individuals in their construction of gendered understandings. Building on Acker's work, Reskin and Padavic (1994) list three gendering processes in working life: the sexual division of labor, the devaluation of women's work, and the construction of gender on the job. They are able to show how these processes mold women's position relative to men. Thus, gender relations are not just one thing or one process, but many simultaneous processes.

The common hierarchical difference between men and women — with men in the dominant position — is quite strong in working life. Gendered hierarchies are not always explicit at the workplace level but are more often tacit (Rantalaiho and Heiskanen 1997). Open and conscious discrimination of women is becoming more rare in the West. In fact, people in organizations quite often are not conscious that their practices are gendered because they take them for granted (Goffman 1967). Gender is constructed at the workplace in the daily work process, and it is involved in solutions about how to organize the work. Some jobs and tasks almost unnoticeably become defined as feminine and others as masculine (Lorber 1994).

Traditional Barriers to Women's Participation in Emergency Management

Emergency management agencies have been traditionally formed by male-oriented occupations of the military and civil defense resulting in a male workforce and work culture (Robertson 1998; Barnecut 1998; Wraith 1997; Gibbs 1990; Phillips 1990). These were men's jobs in a man's world. Robertson (1998) claims that women are so underrepresented in Australian emergency management because they find the male-oriented culture of such organizations in which women are not readily accepted or respected as equal

partners unappealing. Thus, for a long time women have been virtually nonexistent in structurally significant emergency management roles. Formal training for emergency management was previously only available through the military. As long as the military was gender segregated, women were denied access to participation and, thus, access to prerequisite training. In this case, women were doubly segregated — directly by gender discrimination itself, and indirectly by the lack of formal training and experience. Women who do choose to join and remain in emergency management need training courses as a means through which they can be included in the networking and information exchange of the emergency management community (Robertson 1998).

Local emergency management offices often reflect a paramilitary, controlled management approach (Dynes 1983). Thus, the work culture may assume "command and control" authority relations which promote a strict or riin the high priority areas that are considered "more masculine" such as radiological or other hazardous materials, terrorism, communication, transportation and mass evacuation.

This pattern of underutilizing women's capacities in emergency management is not limited to the U.S. Noels' (1998) study of the Caribbean Region disaster management networks revealed that women are represented sparsely on national and local emergency committees, and their "potential as a resource for organized action at all levels of the managerial process" has been ignored. This is also illustrated through the participation of women in the first "Hemispheric Congress on Disaster Reduction and Sustainable Development" held in Miami, Florida, in the fall of 1996. The Congress brought together 215 key stakeholders from public, private, and international organizations from North, South and Central America, Europe, and the Caribbean to discuss and formulate a series of policy initiatives supporting disaster reduction and sustainable development as part of the United Nations Decade for Disaster Reduction. Only fifty-eight participants (27 percent) were women, twenty-four (11 percent) were North American or European, and thirty-four (16 percent) were women representing government and private emergency management agencies from the rest of the hemisphere.

Professionalization of Emergency Management — New Opportunities for Women?

Drabek (1994) claims that the field of emergency management is "professionalizing." The entire nation has experienced a major redirection in disaster preparedness since the 1960s that reflects the rapid emergence of a new professional. Indeed, the decade of the 1980s saw a surge of interest among both academics and practitioners in formalizing emergency management as a

profession to cope with the increasing demand in technological advances needed to mitigate and respond to disasters.

In the past, emergency managers have had little formal emergency management training. The new era of professionalism is indicated in part by new educational and training opportunities such as intensive courses at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Emergency Management Institute. In addition, emergency management certification is now available, and a growing number of degree-based university programs such as the Institute of Emergency Administration and Planning at the University of North Texas have been developed. Former director David Neal (1998) stated that during the first few years of the program (1985-1989) women made up about 20 percent of enrolled students with the number rising close to 40 percent by winter 1998. In contrast, according to Wraith (1997), only about 5 percent of participants in Australia's Emergency Management Institute courses are women. Although the situation at the University of North Texas is encouraging, it is too early to tell to what extent these training and educational programs will draw more women into the field.

In this era of increasing professionalization, it is important to understand women's primary paths of entry into emergency management and how these are likely to change (Enarson 1997). The evaluation of women's career paths in emergency management and their performance in actual disaster-related activities, whether technological, educational, managerial, or otherwise, will contribute not only to equalize gender differences but will improve social resilience to technological and natural disasters.

More and more our society is affected by unforeseen events, and more people are affected every year. There is concern among the public and the government that structural mechanisms to cope with such events need to be developed. According to one informant:

> . . . [O]nly recently has emergency management become an important entity. For a long time the OEM was considered a small off-shoot . . . of the fire department. But, as disasters increase in size, more people realize the importance of the office and a lot more positions are being created and a lot more opportunities are available now. In general, I think that the whole field of emergency management is opening up which creates opportunities for anybody.

However, there is no doubt that women remain in short supply within emergency management organizations at the local level. Although there is little research concerning the utilization of available individuals in a disaster situation, it is evident that status ascription such as age, sex, race, and/or ethnicity affects disaster planning and emergency response through

discrimination/power barriers (Phillips 1990). My respondents recalled specific instances of difficulty working with male organizational representatives in the community, some subtle, some very direct. One respondent described a man who was reluctant to cooperate with her and would often say that he wished they could go back to the "old days" — when her job was done by a man.

Women's Qualifications for Emergency Management Participation

Women's traditional roles often prepare them to be primary contributors to disaster management. In this day and age, women continue to do most of the household and family caregiving work so that an unequal division of domestic responsibility persists even when women participate in the formal labor force in post-industrial societies. The "second shift" occurs when working women return home after a full day in the paid labor force to begin their "second" full day of cleaning house, cooking meals, and caring for children (Hochschild 1989). Running a household with children in today's fast-paced world has become a challenging activity. Motherhood is as an excellent school for management, demanding many of the same skills: organization, pacing, teaching, guiding, leading, monitoring, handling disturbances, and imparting information (Helgesen 1990). Experience in balancing work and family develops skills to deal with conflicting demands.

Similarly, women's experiences as community workers, informal neighborhood leaders, and social activists equip them to respond to community crisis. Enarson and Morrow (1998b) found that women's formal and informal networks were central to both household and community recovery after Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

In addition, women have been part of the paid labor force for a long time, especially when their family's economic need makes it necessary for women to seek outside income (Dunn 1997). Now, women not only work in traditionally held positions such as nursing and teaching, but are increasingly gaining entry into higher paid, more prestigious public and private occupations and professions including management level positions. According to Colwil (1997), women form one third of the management work force in the United States. However, such progress does not seem to have filtered into local emergency management in which we find a much lower percentage of women in high-ranking positions.

Thus, although women play crucial private and public roles managing households and caregiving and as part of the paid labor force, their voices have been largely absent in organizational and community policy-making, including decisions about disaster response and recovery (Enarson and

Morrow 1998a). This is in spite of the fact that the technological and managerial skills women use in their daily lives can be used in disaster management and their contribution can greatly help a community's response effort. And, as Robertson (1998) says, efficient and effective disaster management systems depend on the knowledge and skills of all those who can make a positive contribution.

Women in Local Emergency Management

Today, barriers to women's participation in emergency management is changing, at least partially explained by equal opportunity laws which make it illegal to discriminate against women either in educational opportunities or hiring practices. Although women are now more able to enter the field, the process of full integration appears to be slow and uneven. Even as women play increasingly important roles in emergency management organizations they are still minimally represented in high-ranking positions. Attitudes may be changing even more slowly. One respondent told me:

> . . . [A] lot of younger people have been coming into the field of emergency management although traditionally this office has been primarily made up of retired military personnel especially under the realm of the fire department which has been traditionally male-dominated. It is obvious that there is still some leftovers of this heritage at state, regional, etc. conferences and meetings because I am either the only woman or one of two or three women in attendance at these functions with 50 or so men. . . . I don't think there are actually many female directors. Probably some of the other women in emergency management come from a fire department background.

My informants believe that a division of labor exists within the field where ". . . most . . . women . . . are in special needs and mass care or human services" coordinating positions rather than being represented throughout the entire spectrum of emergency management functions. Indeed, the state of Florida is comprised of 67 counties that maintain an office of emergency management, but as of June, 1998, only ten county OEM directors (15 percent) and nine assistant directors were female (13.5 percent).

A study by Phillips (1990) identifies the characteristics that both men and women deem necessary for women to possess when they participate in leadership roles in emergency response organizations. Respondents indicate that female emergency managers should "be aggressive" which social scientists have shown to be more frequently a product of male socialization. The complexity of this issue is illustrated in this statement by a female emergency manager:

> It is hard especially for women and assertiveness because women have been told that in order for them to be more accepted in a man's world they have to be more assertive but not aggressive because if you are aggressive then you are seen as pushy. But for women even if a person is assertive they are viewed as aggressive. If I or other women are in a room full of men who are talking and talking and making decisions but I have some important things to say also then it is sometimes very intimidating to say, "Whoa, wait, what about this . . ." I think it takes a person who has trained herself to be assertive and be able to interrupt other people and speak out rather than not say anything-in this field if you are not like that then you might as well not have been in the meeting because they don't let you talk.

Phillips (1990) advises that in order to challenge negative stereotypes women need to be assertive, obtain female mentors, use networking skills, and be careful of gendered speech patterns. However, the above respondent's quote implies that not only do women have to modify their social behavior but they must first internalize new ideas of appropriate behavior in order to operate effectively within the emergency management structure. In other words, women must modify their learned female characteristics considerably to match men's work role characteristics. This illustrates Goffman's (1959) thesis that individuals (in this case, women) need to construct a particular image or persona that matches the expectations of the group in order to be accepted and to acquire social mobility.

This in turn places women who aspire to achieve managerial positions or other "men's jobs" in a critical spot. On one hand, women must behave, look, and think like men, effectively becoming "masculinized." On the other hand, women must create a paradigmatic shift that changes the social structure to allow them to remain the way they are — as women — and still be an integral part of the labor force. It will be a challenge for local emergency management organizations and the field at large to preclude women from having to recreate themselves as men, but accept women for who they are with the skills they possess and integrate them into the structure as vital parts of emergency management.

Possible Constraints for Women in Emergency Management

Other issues arise that particularly affect women as they enter the field of emergency management. For example, how are emergency management organizations impacted by work and family conflicts as increasing numbers of women come on board (Enarson 1997)? For instance, each staff member at

local OEMs are required to be "on call" 24 hours a day, one week per month. All of my female informants are single with no children. But, how might this job requirement affect the chances that a married woman with young children is able to do the job? Male responders have traditionally relied on the taken-for-granted presence of women at home to resolve conflicting demands on their time and energy while they are at work (Scanlon 1996).

Furthermore, we should study the affect of the complex intersection of gender and age on female emergency managers. One informant said that she believed some difficulties/barriers that women face in this field have to do with ageism: ". . . [I]f you are young . . . then this is paired up with the gender thing . . . then it is a double whammy." Another informant mentioned the high level of stress of the job "especially being a woman and being young." Although these women feel discrimination now while they are young, will this change as they get older? It may be that as they get older, gain expertise, and prove themselves worthy, they will receive more respect. On the other hand, discrimination may continue or increase as they age, similar to other careers like television broadcasting. In short, we do not know how the aging process will affect the careers of women emergency managers.

We have not had much opportunity to discover how women progress, or not, in their local emergency management careers. Few women currently in the field have been there long. Only time and longitudinal research will reveal the career paths and successes of women emergency managers.

Conclusion

It is evident that women have contributed in unprecedented ways in times of disaster. They are leaders in emergent organizations during and after disaster, especially those responding to structural response deficiencies resulting from restricted visions of response and recovery needs (Neal and Phillips 1990; Wilson and Oyola-Yemaiel 1998). Yet, women's activities in disaster contexts including their roles and experiences in emergency management are still largely understudied. Specifically, Enarson (1997) claims that very few researchers or emergency managers have examined the conditions under which gender makes a difference in emergency management practice or policy. Women have been incorporated into the field, bypassing the military route through formal education and professionalization. But still we do not know whether women operate the OEM differently than men. Are there structural and cultural differences in the organization? How do gender differences affect interagency coordination? How do these differences affect disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery activities? There is reason to expect that better understanding of the impacts of gender differences among emergency

managers, as well as women's ways of exercising leadership, is likely to increase the effectiveness of emergency management (Enarson 1997).

The number of women involved in the formal structure of emergency management is increasing. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine issues such as: women's experiences in emergency management agencies; women's contributions to the emergency management process; the barriers that women face in performing their jobs and in building their careers; and the affect that changes in the field are having on women's place within it. At the moment we have many questions with too few answers. Future research should explore the intersection of race/ethnicity and class among professional women emergency managers. In sum, further analysis of gendered expectations, roles, and interactions within agency dynamics has the potential to significantly increase the effectiveness of disaster preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery at the local level.

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